

Impact of Role Description on Burnout Among Academics in Nigerian

Universities

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Abstract

This study examined impact of role description on burnout among academics in Nigerian Universities. It was a research design of survey type. Respondents consisted of 250 lecturers. A self-developed questionnaire titled “Roles Description and Burnout Questionnaire (RDBQ)” was used for data collection. The findings revealed that there is relationship between role ambiguity and cognitive weariness among academics in Nigerian Universities. The findings revealed that a correlation exists between role ambiguity and emotional exhaustion among academics in Nigerian Universities. Finally, the findings revealed that there is a relationship between gender differences and burnout among academics in Nigerian Universities. The study concluded that ambiguous roles description influence burnout among academics. It was therefore recommended amongst others that management should ensure that staffs receive assignment with necessary resources to complete them. Individual roles are well spelt out for their role responsibility not to be borne by others.

Keywords: Role, description, burnout, academics, universities.

Introduction

Burnout has been a significant focus in occupational health psychology for decades and continues to be relevant in the field today, as various scholars dedicate their efforts to exploring this subject. The Oxford Dictionary of Psychology defines burnout as an acute stress disorder or reaction marked by exhaustion due to overwork, accompanied by anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, depression, and a decline in work performance. Acute refers to critical symptoms that onset suddenly and resolve rapidly (Colman, 2003). Based on this definition, it follows that burnout is significant,

onset is sudden, but fortunately, it tends to diminish rapidly, particularly when it receives the necessary attention. The definition provided by Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary describes burnout as the depletion of physical or emotional strength or motivation, typically stemming from extended periods of stress or frustration. Some individuals in the field argue that burnout is not necessarily work-related, but can be found among the unemployed. The predominant perspective in burnout psychology views burnout as primarily associated with work, thereby allowing for clearer distinctions from other related concepts, like depression (Schaufeli & Taris, 2025). To elucidate the connection to work, the phrases 'job burnout', 'professional burnout', and 'occupational burnout' have been employed (Ahola, 2007)

The term burnout refers specifically to job burnout, professional burnout, and occupational burnout, unless otherwise stated explicitly. Studies have convincingly demonstrated that individuals at risk of burnout (those who experience chronic exhaustion and maintain a negative, cynical outlook toward their work) exhibit diminished job performance and may encounter significant health issues over time (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014). A significant issue is that when employees reach high levels of burnout, they frequently remain in a difficult situation. Longitudinal studies indicate that burnout may exhibit considerable stability over durations of five, ten, or even fifteen years (Bakker, & Sixma, 2011). What factors contribute to the prolonged nature of burnout? It is our belief that the phenomenon of burnout has not been sufficiently elucidated, as the majority of research fails to consider burnout as a continuous process that develops over time. Individuals experiencing burnout exhibit persistently elevated levels of daily fatigue. Consequently, individuals experiencing burnout appear to hinder their own daily functioning due to poor sleep quality.

Burnout refers to a psychological syndrome that may arise from prolonged work-related stress. Burnout is linked to various aspects of both the work environment and individual employee characteristics. The probability of burnout occurring rises in scenarios where high work demands are paired with limited resources (Martimo, 2010). Burnout can be characterized as a professional crisis experienced by an individual in relation to their work. Burnout manifests as an extensive exhaustion that accumulates following sustained endeavors aimed at reaching objectives, in the absence of essential resources. Furthermore, individuals' perspectives on their own work and changes in the workplace, as well as their awareness of their skills and productivity, are important

factors to consider. A person experiencing burnout perceives a decline in the significance and meaningfulness of their work, alongside a diminishing sense of professional competence. Regrettably, the issue of burnout has become entrenched in various professional environments. For instance, as reported by Health 2000 material, during the years 2000-2001, among Finnish individuals aged 30 and older who were actively employed, 2.5% experienced severe burnout, while 25% reported mild burnout (Martimo, 2010). This serves as a singular illustration among numerous other instances of burnout observed in various nations.

Burnout syndrome consists of three specific conditions where employees feel emotionally drained (emotional exhaustion), exhibit a sense of detachment from others (depersonalization), and encounter a reduced sense of effectiveness in their work (diminished personal accomplishment) (Maslach & Jackson, 2023). Additionally, various studies on burnout have indicated that the syndrome may stem from structural factors within the work environment, especially characterized by high job demands coupled with low job resources. Another study indicates that individual factors such as neuroticism and perfectionism play a significant role in the development of burnout, as these characteristics predispose employees to cope inappropriately with their high job demands (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010). The correlation between burnout and shift work is significant. In nations with a significant prevalence of shift work, there is evidence of burnout occurrences. Even with the extensive information available, our understanding of the individual employee's contribution to the daily processes that could result in burnout remains limited.

Fatigue associated with shift work is a prevalent issue in numerous sectors. The connection between fatigue from extended shifts and catastrophic events is evident in incidents like the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the Three Mile Island incident, and the grounding of the Exxon Valdez (Miller 2011). Nevertheless, the existing studies present mixed results, with certain investigations indicating minimal variations regarding cost or productivity and levels of fatigue (Duchon 1994).

Tucker (1998) investigated how role description influences alertness. The findings indicated that an increased number of rest days between role descriptions correlated with marginally elevated alertness and reduced fatigue levels. Continuous engagement in these sleep-depriving activities or jobs can result in prolonged involvement, which may ultimately lead to burnout. According to Killgore (2007), sleep deprivation negatively affects the integration of emotion and cognition,

which is essential for guiding moral judgment. The natural inclination of humans to be active during the day and rest at night can be disrupted by job description in this pattern. When such disruptions are coupled with excessive workloads, they can result in significant stress for individuals. Prolonged exposure to altered sleep patterns and deprivation can ultimately lead to burnout. This has the potential to create a ripple effect impacting employees, employers, companies, industries, and even the nation as a whole. To mitigate the impact of burnout on employees, clear role descriptions are essential, as they diminish work ambiguity and provide workers with defined boundaries and responsibilities. To mitigate the impact of burnout on employees, the role description technique is employed to address any ambiguity in job responsibilities by clearly defining the specific tasks assigned to an individual or a team.

Role descriptions encompass both the comprehensive Human Resources documents detailing all responsibilities and qualifications, as well as the more concise versions found in job postings (Kourmentza, 2014). A role description serves as an important duty statement that effectively guides new employees in understanding their job and responsibilities within the department. Job and role descriptions delineate the responsibilities assigned to an employee and outline the expectations placed upon them. The job description offers employees a detailed outline and primary goal of a role, helping them assess their ability to fulfill the responsibilities associated with that position (EleniKourmentza, 2014). Crafting a detailed and comprehensive job description is an essential initial step in the recruitment process for employees. A clearly defined and articulated role description is likely to influence the level of stress encountered by an employee.

Identification of the Issue

It is widely acknowledged that employees experiencing burnout exhibit significant exhaustion and a negative outlook on their work. Various elements, including role ambiguity, contribute to the phenomenon of job burnout. One of the severe consequences of individual burnout includes experiencing physical issues, such as headaches, insomnia, fatigue, and substance abuse, as well as conflicts within family and marital relationships. It was noted that burnout can lead to a decrease in job performance, which may manifest as absenteeism, a reluctance to attend work, dissatisfaction with one's performance, and an extension of work-related issues into personal life. It is essential for an agency to take into account the physical health, psychological well-being,

safety, and efficiency in the workplace. When evaluating the financial and human toll of fatigued workers, it is crucial to prioritize the promotion of scientific understanding and the development of viable interventions. Fatigue resulting from extended burnout has been connected to the aforementioned disasters, including the Chernobyl nuclear accident, the Three Mile Island incident, and the grounding of the Exxon Valdez (Miller 2011). Workers who are fatigued or tired pose a risk not only to themselves but also to their organization and the public at large. The incidence of workers succumbing to ailments related to burnout, for instance, exceeds the incidence of workers dying from natural causes. Professions that provide assistance, including probation officers, social workers, educators, lawyers, law enforcement officers, doctors and nurses, psychologists, among others, have historically been the primary subjects of burnout studies due to their significant susceptibility to stress and resulting burnout.

Hypotheses for Investigation

1. A lack of correlation exists between role ambiguity and cognitive weariness among academics in Nigerian Universities.
2. A lack of correlation exists between role ambiguity and emotional exhaustion among academics in Nigerian Universities.
3. There is no relationship between gender differences and burnout among academics in Nigerian Universities.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. It is a form of descriptive design that uses a representative sample to collect data for systematic description of existing situation or phenomenon. The population consisted of all university lecturers in tertiary institution in Nigeria. A simple random sampling technique was used to choose the sample for the study. The sample of the study consisted of 250 lecturers in Ondo State tertiary institutions. The instrument for data collection was a self-constructed questionnaire titled “Role Description and Burnout. 250 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and 250 were returned. The instrument was divided into sections; section A contains personal data of the respondents. While section B contains the item to answer the question raised. The face and content validity of the instrument was ascertained by the researchers. Test-retest technique was used by the researcher; the questionnaire was distributed to

some sample of twenty lecturers in Federal University of Technology, Akure (FUTA). After two-week interval the same instrument was re-administered to the same set of lecturers and Pearson product moment correlation was used to determine the correlation coefficient which was 0.58 which certified that the questionnaire was reliable. Data were analyzed using frequency count, percentage and Chi-square.

Results and Discussion

H₀₁: There is correlation between role ambiguity and cognitive weariness among academics in Nigerian Universities.

Table 1.

Variable	Mean	SD	r-cal	r-critical	Sig. level	Decision
Role Ambiguity	54.952	16.028				
			0.374	0.087	0.05	Significance
Cognitive weariness	18.360	7.586				

H₀₂: There is correlation between role ambiguity and emotional exhaustion among academics in Nigerian Universities.

Table 2.

Variable	Mean	SD	r-cal	r-critical	Sig. level	Decision
Role Ambiguity	54.952	16.028				
			0.193	0.087	0.05	Significance
Emotional Exhaustion	10.988	4.586				

H₀₃: There is no relationship between gender differences and burnout among academics in Nigerian Universities

Table 3.

SMBM Scales	Male Mean/SD	Female Mean/SD	t	Df	(2-tailed)	Decision
Physical Exhaustion	<u>22.51</u> 13.761	<u>19.94</u> 10.933	1.407	248	.161	Insignifican t
Cognitive Weariness	<u>18.0503</u> 7.20118	<u>19.14</u> 8.485	1.025	248	.306	Insignifican t
Emotional Exhaustion	<u>10.6313</u> 4.54297	<u>11.8873</u> 4.60605	1.964	248	.051	Significant

Discussion of Findings

Hypothesis one examined the relationship between role ambiguity and cognitive weariness. When data was collected from the employees of manufacturing companies in Lagos State, it was concluded that the respondents support the hypothesis. In the Correlation results the role ambiguity and Cognitive weariness variables were positively related with each other at a point of (0.374 at $p < 0.00$). This result is in contrast to the researches. For example, Seeman (1953) in his study found that for school executives' potential sources of role ambiguity resulted in significant decision-making difficulty (cognitive weariness). Shirom (2006) in his study of nurses also supported the work of Seeman (1953) that role ambiguity has a negative effect on the cognitive alertness of workers.

Hypothesis two examined the relationship between role ambiguity and emotional exhaustion. The Correlation results showed role ambiguity and Emotional Exhaustion variables were positively related. The study of Muchinsky, (1997) and Jackson and Schuler, (1985) that role ambiguity will lead to negative outcomes which such as anxiety, emotional exhaustion, helplessness, confusion and depression among employees also support the outcome of this hypothesis. Also, the findings of crane and Iwanicki (1986) in a sample of special education teachers found that role ambiguity is a significant predictor emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis three to test for association between gender and burnout, results of these analyses indicated that there were no significant differences between males and females on their levels of physical exhaustion and cognitive weariness while the result showed a significance differences between males and females on their levels of emotional exhaustion as measured by the scales of the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM).

Conclusion

The study concluded that ambiguous roles description influence burnout among academics in Nigeria universities, such as marking manually large scripts, supervising many project students both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. No access to leave because of all year-round academic activities.

Recommendation

1. Ensure that staffs receive assignment with necessary resources to complete them.
2. individual's role description should be well spelt out when employing them.

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